

Freethought

MONTHLY JOURNAL OF INDIAN RATIONALIST ASSOCIATION

JUNE & JULY 1980 (Delayed)

Rs. 1-25

(The Booklet "LIFE AND SOUL" is sent as a supplement to this issue)

Thought for the month;

"To explain the unknown by the known is a logical procedure; to explain the known by the unknown is a form of theological lunacy.

—David Brooks.

Vol. X No. 6

Annual Subscription : Rs. 15/-

SCIENCE IS UNDERSTOOD, THEOLOGY BELIEVED

To

The Editor.

FREETHOUGHT, MADRAS-600 008.

Dear Sir,

Before replying Mr. Colin Maine's letter, published in March 1980 issue of Freethought, I would like to draw your attention to the fact that the article entitled 'Historical Study of Islam' was in fact an abbreviation made by Mr. Y. A. Lokhandwala of my book entitled 'The Origin and Development of Islam' recently published by Orient Longmans. As an author, it is, therefore, my responsibility to reply to the points raised by Mr. Maine.

The burden of Mr. Maine's argument is that the pre Islamic Arab Society had its own culture which was "Far more humane than that provided by Islam." He also feels that there were hardly any blood-feuds in Arabia before Islam and that after Islam was established, thousands of people were killed. He also says that "it is wrong to say that Islam preached equality" as it permitted the ultimate inequality-slavery. He also pleads that those who are more interested in Islam should read his booklet 'The Dead Hand of Islam'.

I have not only read that booklet but also written a review of it at the instance of Mr. Y. A. Lokhandwala and handed it over to him months back for publication in Freethought. Mr. Maine, as often happens with humanists and rationalists, takes highly abstract view of their values and ideals which is not only unhistorical but also ignores concrete realities and totality of the situation. Social transformation from one system to another system—specially involving economic transformation—is always a very painful and violent process. The French revolution and the Russian revolution are the standing testimony to the amount of violence involved in any revolutionary process. Thousands and thousands perished in these revolutions yet no one condemns these revolutions (except of course the vested interests who lost their privileges) as these revolutions brought about radical changes in the social structures which made further progress possible.

Freethought

Editorial

The Church and the Tribals

For long the Christian missionaries have been active in India's mountainous tribal areas which nourish backwardness and superstition. Even a naive Indian will not however, grant that these missionaries had been prompted solely by the desire to spread education or extend health facilities to succour the tribals who had long been exploited by unscrupulous landlords on one hand and the politicians on the other.

In India's north eastern frontier lies the troubled state of Tripura. For long the New Zealand Baptist Christian Union had been very active in this area, particularly after the state's accession to India in 1949. Spreading its net wide, the mission leaders told the tribals invoking their pride in a separate culture that they were swamped by native religion and culture and showed how the Mizos, Nagas and Khasis etc., were better off since they embraced the gospel. Thus many tribes in Tripura, like the Lushai (Mizos) Halam, Kuki, Garo and Doulon tribes became converts. The parent body in New Zealand pumps money and materials to the Tripura Baptist Christian Union for activities that include political subversion. The mouthpiece of the Union argues that the tribals of Tripura should be organised into a unified Christian group taking into account their desire for more power and freedom. A pamphlet of a director of the Bible Society of India States that "The Political upheaval has made the tribals of Tripura receptive to the Gospel" and again "The Church grows through peoples movement".

It is evident that the Church leaders are out to cash in on people's disenchantment and sow seeds of subversion in a sensitive area. FREETHOUGHT appeals to the Government to take note of such anti-nation anti-people activities and ban church money remissions from abroad.

"Revolution is not a tea party", said Maoze Dong. History bears him out. Islam was also a revolution which changed the entire social structure of Arabian society. The pre-Islamic society was tribal and nomadic. Islam transformed it into a higher social stage, shattering the tribal structure. Certainly this transformation could not have taken place without bloodshed. What Mr. Maine says about wars and number of persons dead after Islam established itself in Arabia should be seen in this light. An abstract and idealistic approach would not help, at least when one is trying to understand historical process.

It is also true that Islam prescribed rather harsh punishments for a number of offences and crimes. But is no use applying 20th century norms to the tribal Arabian society thirteen hundred years back. Light or heavy punishments always depend on situational context. Mohammed was dealing with turbulent and anarchic Arabs and these punishments unscrupulous were to be applied in extreme cases and not for any offence, without considering the circumstances. The crafty politicians of the Muslim world who use religion as an instrument for their own ends also emphasise the Islamic penal code as it helps them in creating ancillousion of Islamic state without disturbing the status quo which is heavily weighted in favour of vested interests.

The Koran has number of verses which contradict each other (one can quote verses from the Koran, both in favour of killing as well as making peace) as the prophet had to deal with contradictory situations. The Koran fully reflects all the contradictions of a turbulent society caught in the process of revolutionary change. The Muslim Ulema fail to understand this historical context and hence refuse to perceive these contradictions in proper perspective. Only a person with full understanding of the problems of a society undergoing radical transformation in its structure and at the same time having thorough study of the Koranic text and its different interpretations through the mediaval ages would be able to appreciate these complex problems. Reading Koran without contextual study would only confuse and baffle or lead to enunciation as Mr. Colin Maine does.

I hope Mr. Maine instead of abstractly applying 20th century concepts to mediaval Islamic society, would coolly and dispassionately try to adopt an analytical approach to Islam in the light of different aspects of the society suggested above.

Asghar Ali K. Engineer,
Bombay.

[Mr. Engineer's review of Mr. Maine's booklet on
Islam appears on page 12. —Ed.]

Reader's forum

Sir,

SOLAR ECLIPSE—SCIENCE & POLITICIANS

It is really heartening to learn that hundreds of scientists, from all over India and abroad, eagerly directed their scientific gadgets towards the sun during the all-too-brief duration of the total solar eclipse. Not a single central or state minister is reported to have visited the important centres of eclipse visibility—be it either to supervise arrangements or to encourage our enthusiastic scientists. Shall we thank our ministers for keeping themselves off the scientific community?

Contrast this with the huge 'mela' of lakhs and lakhs of pilgrims who assembled at Kurukshetra for a holy dip in the sacred Brahmasarovara. Our ministers are reported to have dutifully joined the lakhs of pilgrims at Kurukshetra presumably for a dip in Brahmasarovara to pollute it with their innumerable sins, ignorance and lacking conscience.

While our young scientists were enthusiastically on their eclipse-study expeditions, it is amusing to watch our rulers who were busy with holy dips and 'Surya Grahana Adbhuta Mahashanti and Poornahuti.' Our ministers seem to have conveniently forgotten, even if they were aware of its existence that one of the ten clauses of Fundamental Duties enshrined in our Indian Constitution reads, "It is the duty of every citizen of India to develop the scientific temper, humanism and the spirit of enquiry and reform." May be that our politicians have taken it for granted that the above clause is meant only to find a place in the question papers for our political science students.

One cannot help but to concur, though shamefacedly, with Lord Fenner Brockway, the famous Labour M. P. of Great Britain who bluntly asked at a World Conference, "Do you want us to give you (developing Asian Countries) a share of the products of our hard labour to enable you to waste more time on prayers, meditations, poojas and pilgrimages?"

—S. Balachandra Rao,
Bangalore.

News & Notes

M.P.R.A. CONFERENCE

The Madhya Pradesh Rationalist Conference was held on Sunday the 11th May at Bhilai under the Presidentship of Mr. Y. A. Lokhandwala. Mr. M. V. Ramamurty, Vice-President of I.R.A., inaugurated the conference and read a paper on "Rationalism, Atheism, Secularism and Humanism". Mr. Lokhandwala, the President of I.R.A. deplored the anti-secularist attitude of several political parties.

As many as seven resolutions were passed in the delegate's session under the Presidentship of Mr. V. Verghese, the President of the local association. They included a request to the Central and State Governments to ban the insane and immoral destruction of foodstuffs in the name of performing 'yagnas', a call to the Governments to prevent unauthorised construction of places of worship and prayer in the midst of roads and road margins, and other public places as they deprive the general public of the use of public place for recreational and cultural activities. The conference pledged its support to the Women's Liberation Movement. It demanded that the students be provided with Secularist education. Mr. S. V. S. Nair, the General Secretary, submitted the report of the activities of the Association.

A public meeting was held in the evening. The local president, who graced the chair, appealed for strengthening of the Rationalist movement. Mr. Lokhandwala, speaking in Hindi spoke on the "Anti-Rationalist nature of Religions". Mr. M. V. Ramamurty addressed the gathering on "Rationalism—My attitude to Life." A dance recital gave the finale to the function attended by a large number of women.

ONGOLE STUDY CAMP

A four day Study Camp was conducted at Ongole under the auspices of the Prakasam District Rationalist Association of A. P. from 1st of May onwards. Mr. Ravipudi Venkatadri President of the A. P. Rationalist Association acted as a Director of Studies. Mr. M. V. Ramamurty, Vice-President of the I.R.A. while inaugurating the study camp called for free enquiry, criticism and self-criticism. He dealt with the aspects of the Rationalist Movement obtaining in the foreign countries. Mr. V. Subba Rao, spoke on obscenity while Mr. Easwaraprabhu talked on scriptures. Mr. K. Padma Rao, Vice-President of A. P. Rationalist Association, spoke on "Bible—a critical study." Mr Hazrat Ali explained the implications of Islam. Mr. Kolla Subba Rao and Mr. N. V. Brahman spoke on "Education—Secularism" and "Man, Nature and Society" respectively. Mr. B. Ramakrishna, author of "Charvakudi", expatiated on the "Ancient Materialist and Atheist thought." Mr. Venkatadri lectured on "Origin of Life." Other speakers included Dr. G. Vijayam, Mr. Jain, Mr. Jayagopal and Mr. B. V. Narasimha Rao.

The Director of Studies in his concluding remarks gave a detailed analysis of Social Revolution and stated that almost all rebellions in the name of Revolution, ended in the establishment of dictatorship, and hence, unless and until they are preceded by Philosophical Revolution social revolution cannot be fruitful. He affirmed that the basis of the Rationalist Movement was very wide and hence talkers of different schools of thought were invited.

The camp ended with a public meeting on the last day under the Presidentship of Mr. Gorantla Raghavaiah. Mr. Katti Padma Rao pleaded for a literature which will help the social progress. Kalaprapurna Kondaveeti Venkata Kavi pleaded for Secularist outlook among the people.

—M. V. Ramamurty,
Hyderabad.

THE BENEVOLENT GOD

"Velayudhan Nair, a mahout was accidentally trampled to death by his elephant, at a temple festival in Kunnamkulam, near Guruvayur.

While the mahout was sitting by the side of the elephant, and relaxing, the animal moving a step backward, accidentally trampled on him.

The tusker belonged to the Guruvayur temple."

COMMENT: There seems to be no limit for the benevolence of Guruvayoor Sri Krishna—Ed.

GOD & SCIENCE

The following is a news item which has appeared in the Indian Express, dated 18-12-79:

"The Tirumala Titupati Devasthanams, in order to preserve the freshness of the famous laddu of Sri Venkateswara Temple, Tirumala, has obtained the expert opinion of the Central Food Technological Institute, Mysore."

COMMENT: God is beyond science they say. But alas! God has to approach the scientific institutes for helping him to keep his prasadam fresh!—Ed.

SUPERSTITIOUS SCIENTIST

Raichur Feb. 18 (PTI) A Scientist here missed his life time opportunity of seeing the Solar Eclipse as he was wandering between the proverbial "two world" of faith & science—and finally chose the former.

Prof. P.V.R. Sharma, Head of The Department of Physics at I. V. D. College near here - did not see the spectacle of the century because it coincided with his birthday star.

Seeing the coincidence as a bad omen, he also gave away a tiny image of god to a purohit.

However, the professor proved to be of great help to the scientists, all of whom had a word of praise for the hospitality they received from the Sharmas.

- Times of India, dt. 19-2-80.

(It is indeed a shame to the entire scientific community. Readers may be interested to know that Mr. Deodhekar, Treasurer of National Secular Society, U. K., came down to Raichur all the way from London to see the total Solar Eclipse on 18-2-80. Though he is not a 'scientist' in the popular sense of the term. The so called scientists have a lot to learn from the Rationalists - Ed.)

HEAVENLY LIARS

A little girl asked her mother if liars ever went to Heaven. "I suppose not," said the cautious mother.

"Well, did Grandpa and Uncle Jim and Aunt Luch ever tell a lie?"

"Oh, I suppose at sometime in our lives all of us have said something that wasn't exactly true," replied the mother.

"Well," said the little girl with decisiveness, "I guess it is awful lonesome up there in Heaven with only God and George Washington."

COMMENT:

Poor George Washington is paying for his deeds!

HOLI HOOLIGANISM

How anyone's celebration of a festival can become more enjoyable by launching an assault on other people is an enduring mystery. A rational explanation for this uncultured behaviour need not be looked for: it is usually a total lack of consideration for others that is to blame.

On the occasion of celebrating the spring festival, Holir thousands of unwilling people were scattered with coloured water and powder last week. Several legally parked cars were

similarly treated same with paint which it would take money and effort to remove. There is a clear indication of an increase in the violent nature of such celebrations—or perhaps in the arrogance behind such hooliganism; this is to be roundly condemned.

The assault on the ear continues unabated. Saturday night must have been a nightmarish one for thousands of innocents in Bombay with age-old and tasteless film songs being “broadcast” by highpowered amplifiers. The citizen’s right to peace was rudely challenged by these celebrants.

Is there a lasting solution for this problem?

(Courtesy: Times of India)

COMMENT: Might is right and mobocracy, with the tacit approval of the powers-that-be. To channelise the energies properly will spell doom to the existing system

SORCERERS & WITCHES IN CHINA

The prevalence of witches in these supposedly scientific and enlightened times should cause surprise, particularly in China which has taken several leaps forward towards reason. The Peking City government has warned that sorcerers and witches exploiting the local superstitions will be subject to punishment with jail and fines.

COMMENT: What an impossible example to follow! If India were to follow suit, police will have no time to go after prohibitn-oioffenders!!

THE RESURRECTION

A blackman proclaiming himself to be Jesus Christ is organising a religious movement at Kitwe on the Copperbelt, the newspaper ‘Times of Zambia’ reported on Monday.

The Movement is led by Chanda Sema, from Chinsali in Zambia’s northern province, who declared that the yard at his house in Kitwe is the “Holy Land.”

He claims: “I am the real Jesus. I have come back now in a black skin and I have come to stay forever.”

COMMENT: How do we make him realise that Chris has already out-lived his utility?

CONFESSOR IN TURN CONFESSES

An Anglican priest, Rev. Mathew Peiris, the former Vicar of the St. Paul the Apostle Church, was arrested in Colombo on charges of conspiring to murder his wife and a man who was staying at the Vicarage, according to the Colombo police.

Both Mrs. Eunice Lois Liris, 59, who died in March, and Russel Ingram, 88, who died in August, were in lengthy coma before their deaths.

COMMENT: Perhaps the priest suspected his wife of committing the seventh sin! But than his ‘god’ could not help him to retain his wife! Perhaps he should have become a Hindu and worshipped the Phallus symbol as ‘Shiva’ to ensure his two virility!

Rationalist Friends’ Association, Bhimavaram (West Godavari) held its second public meeting 24-2-80 in the Town Hall premises. About 2000 people attended. Sri. K. Prabhakara rao, President, Town Hall presided. Sri Jwalamukhi revolutionary poet spoke on injustice done to Rationalism in ancient literature and Sri K. Padmarao, Vice-President, Andhra Pradesh Rationalist Association spoke on the explosion of religion and Sri P. K. Naras. Reddy spoke on Vemanna the Rationalist poet. Sri G. Baburao the Radio Artist entertained with songs on rationalism.

NEW OFFICE BEARERS FOR BENGAL RATIONALIST ASSOCIATION

At a meeting of the members of Bengal Rationalist Association held on 18th April 1980, a committee has been formed with the following members:

President: Mr. T. P. NALIATH
Secretary: Mr. P. T. RAULOSE
Treasurer: Mr. C. K. K. MENON
Members: Mr. K V R NAIR &
Mr. K. SREEDHARAN

Book Review

DISTORTION OF ISLAM

Asghar Ali Engineer

THE DEAD HAND OF ISLAM BY COLIN MAINE

(Published by . The Rationalist Association
of New South Wales, Australia)

What is happening in the Islamic world today especially in Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia has aroused the interest of many people especially the rationalists in the theory and practice of Islam. It was, therefore, quite natural that Mr. Colin Maine, a rationalist, thought of writing a booklet on this subject.

But it seems Mr. Colin Maine, in his zeal has drawn hasty and unwarranted conclusions about the religion of Islam. It appears that what is happening in Iran and Pakistan today deeply perturbed Mr. Maine and he hurriedly consulted some source books on Islam and wrote this booklet. The result is a highly distorted picture of Islam.

I would like to point out at the outset that by conviction I am a rationalist myself and the criticism of Mr. Maine's booklet is only to put things in proper perspective and not to react to Mr. Maine's criticism of Islam as a faithful Muslim. I am also of the view that facts don't speak for themselves. Facts are always selected according to the subjective bias of a person and are made to speak what one likes them to speak. Mr. Colin Maine is no exception to this rule. Though he has quoted the Koranic verses and many other facts about Islamic teachings and Jurisprudence correctly, he has not put them in a correct historical perspective and the result is complete distortion of Islam. It is my firm conviction that no religion can be understood fully and properly without first thoroughly understanding the material situation in which it is born. Its doctrines and teachings are deeply influenced by historical, social and economic factors prevailing at that time.

But Mr. Maine, it is clear from his booklet, does not believe in the objective study of a society and co-relating it with the religion he is trying to write about. Mr. Maine, on the contrary, tries to see Islamic teachings in isolation and draws disastrously wrong conclusion. Mr. Maine says, "according to both Hadith and Koran Islam must be the world's most oppressive religion. It is undemocratic, it is puritanical, it is barbarously punitive, it oppresses women, its laws are cruel to animals, it is intolerant towards other religions, it is anti-intellectual, it places restrictions upon art".

Well, if seen from the point of view of our age some penal measures described by Islam may appear to be barbaric. But we cannot judge the bygone ages from the norms and the ethical standards prevalent in our own time. But that is precisely what Mr. Maine is trying to do. In order to properly evaluate the Islamic penal code and some of the Islamic teachings we will have to look at them from the point of view of the then prevailing milieu. Islam originated in Mecca where a new commercial society was emerging from the womb of a tribal society. The Arab tribes were fiercely independent and their women too enjoyed relatively greater measure of freedom. There was no enforcing agency and each tribe was law unto itself. However, the newly emerging commercial society which was supposed to be more civilized could not carry on for long with inter-tribal conflicts and varying tribal codes as the new society emerging in the Mecca needed a normative pattern of behaviour and a uniform penal code which could insure order in the society.

To govern a society effectively it is not enough to have a spiritual and transcendent vision and certainly not if the people to be governed are as fiercely turbulent as the Bedouin tribes of Arabia. A prophet or a reformer has to take these mundane factors into account and Muhammad certainly did that. He had to prescribe rather harsh measures to discipline the turbulent Bedouin tribes.

Mr. Maine also seems to be a victim of common prejudice that Islam was forced at the point of sword. He quoted Sir William Muir to this effect. "But for the rest of the sword is not to be sheathed till they be exterminated, or submit to the faith which is become superior to every other religion." He also quotes a Koranic verse:

"Fight and slay the pagan wherever you find them," to prove his point. Well, this is what is called selective bias and projecting an event so selected out of its total context. Such Koranic verses, unless seen in the background of the concrete situation confronting the prophet, will be grossly misunderstood. Only those who have complete grasp of the history of the period when the Koranic verses were being revealed, can properly understand their significance. There are also verses in the Koran like "For you is your religion, for me is my religion" or "there is no compulsion in religion". One will be hard put to explain these contradictory verses if the concrete situation within which these verses were revealed are not borne in mind. Also very often historians have confused the spread of Islamic Empire with that of Islamic religion.

It is not possible to deal with all the aspects of this highly controversial subject in a short review. It calls for a very detailed treatment. Suffice it may to say that Mr. Maine has been grossly misled by firstly his pre-conceived notions and secondly his extremely superficial study of the subject. Had he seen the origin and development of this religion in the concrete historical conditions he would have drawn different conclusions. Here it will be interesting to quote Justice V. R. Krishna Iyer to show what great difference one's subjective notion makes in interpreting religion. Mr. Iyer says, "The cheap jibe about 'freak talaqs' and the helpless bondage of women to wedlock cannot be blamed on Quoranic injunctions". On the contrary, having regard to the circumstance of pre-Islamic Arabia reeking with sexual promiscuity and social injustice, wives unlimited and divorce at pleasure for men and

unbreakable chains for women, this great messenger of God and revolutionary had planted restraints on the male and granted cautious rights to the female, and innovated a rational and fair system, astonishingly radical and modern and more protective than Manu's verdict on women."

This is not to justify what is happening in the Islamic world today. The penal code prescribed by Islam may have had relevance in the sixth and seventh century Arabia but it certainly needs to be changed in keeping with the ethos and values of our age. The essence of religion does not lie in its penal code. It lies in its value system. Moral norms and punitive measures prescribed for breach thereof are product of a particular age and society and cannot be treated as eternal. Islam like any other religion, should be seen in a historical and social context. Neither its total condemnation nor following it blindly would serve the needs of the Muslim peoples. What is needed is re-interpretation of Islam as it continues to be a living faith for millions of Muslims in the world.

A SILP

The article Historical Study of Islam was authored by Mr. Asghar Ali Engineer. It was abridged by Mr. Yahya Lokhandwala for FREETHOUGHT. We regret the error.

Ed.

**ANOTHER LAND MARK IN THE HISTORY OF
INDIAN RATIONALIST ASSOCIATION**



GOLDEN JUBILEE CELEBRATION

&

Tenth all India Rationalist Conference

on

27th & 28th December 1980

at

BOMBAY

Admission only for member of I.R.A. and its Affiliated Association. This is a unique occasion for all Rationalists in India to meet Senior Rationalists and participate in the deliberation. Please reserve the above dates. More details in the next issue.

Edited and Published by C. A. Seshadri for Indian Rationalist Association, 28/18, Pantheon Road, Madras-600 008, Printed at Ambiga Printers, (phone 21163) Madras-1. for Vijee Press.